DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 562 CS 215 838

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TITLE The Literacy of Silence.
PUB DATE 1997-03-13
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Cultural Pluralism; *Diversity (Student); *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; Journal Writing; *Learning Strategies; *Student Development; Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS *Silence; Writing Thinking Relationship

ABSTRACT

A technique called the "do now" illustrates how it is not the method, but the purpose, that creates effective teaching techniques. Beginning the first activity of a freshman composition class with moments of silent reflection, or "do now," includes brief instructions to students to respond to whatever word or phrase the instructor wants them to think about more deeply, with the instructor writing on the blackboard, for instance: Journal Entry #1: Environment. The instructor might ask some questions to stimulate several directions of thought. A simple 3-field taxonomy explains how the "do now" technique works to initiate literacy in the classroom: writing is thinking; listening constructs meaning; and student authority develops from silence. Teachers must address the macrocosm of personalities, including those with multicultural backgrounds, within a writing workshop, and they must be aware of their own social and personal attitudes to facilitate and become part of the learning process. As students learn within this environment to deconstruct their cultural, racial, and gender prejudices, they can also learn to socially construct their opinions in a caring atmosphere that encourages differences. (CR)

Linda L. Reesman
Presentation for CCCC / March 13, 1997
Session: From Silence to Performance: Community Journal, Performance Games, Inner Speech, Silence



## The Literacy of Silence

In a vain attempt to pursue a teaching position in the New York City Public Schools some years ago, I attended a workshop for future teachers with a coordinator who was an exceptional educator. When it came to sharing his twenty-five years of teaching experiences with a group of budding novices, his approach was dynamic and his manner perceptive. As a high school teacher of English in an inner city school environment, he found that he had to quickly engage his students in order to assume control of the class. Not a simple thing to do! The gem he shared with us that day in August turned out to be a treasure that has provided me with the glue for my classroom environment of first-year college composition students. This jewel he called the "*do now*."

If form follows function, to use an architectural metaphor, then this technique will illustrate how it is not the method but the purpose that creates effective teaching techniques. I incorporated the "*do now*" into my 8:00 A.M. composition class. At that hour of the morning most students have to battle public transportation, traffic problems, and other personal distractions to get to class. I, too, need to collect my thoughts, review my goals, and organize my mental stance. So, I begin the first activity with moments of silent reflection–that is, *"do now."* My brief instructions to the students are to respond to whatever word or phrase I want them to think about more deeply. On the blackboard I will simply write: *Journal Entry #1: Environment.* I might ask some questions to stimulate several directions

of thought. What do you think about the environment? What does it mean to you? What kinds of environments are familiar to you? The students are encouraged to associate ideas in whatever ways are meaningful to them. For the next ten or fifteen minutes the students are quiet, contemplative, and yet, actively participating. The class is silent; literacy is in progress. Students are thinking, feeling, reflecting. As I read their journal entries, I discover how literacy takes place.

The following is an excerpt from a journal entry on the topic of environment.

> When I think of the word environment many thoughts come to my head such as birds singing, nature, green grass growing, and the world around us that we live in. It also could mean situations that happen in everyday society to people or things. Many people today have different environments that they live in. They could be poor, rich, black, white, but that is why everyone is different. If everyone was the same, life would be too boring. (Mary)

This is a journal entry on the topic of change.

> In my personal life I just went through a big change. I used to always wear my hair in a ponytail, never wore makeup because I thought it came from animals and hated dressing up. Ever since I was a child I was always a tomboy who played sports and beat up boys. But now this one person in my life changed this point. Now I wear makeup. My nails are always done. My hair is always down and I care more about myself and body. I think all a girl needs, to do this drastic change, is a gorgeous guy because she wants to impress him. I would

like to know if guys do this when they want to impress girls. (Mary)

Within the opening minutes of the class several important processes are occurring. I have developed a simple three-fold taxonomy to explain my perception of how the "*do now*" technique works to initiate literacy in the classroom. My foremost premise of a composition class is that *writing is thinking.* Secondly, *listening constructs meaning.* Finally, *student authority develops from silence.* Every student has discovered something to write during this opening exercise. Those who choose to share either their writing or responses to others' writings will benefit even further. However, even at this preliminary stage of the class, knowledge is acquired as students engage in thinking about the topic and committing their ideas to paper. The journal entry is used as a point of departure from silent literacy or inner conversation to a class discussion encouraged by comments from the students and my own responsive remarks. Literacy moves from an internal dialogue to a social dialogue as the classroom environment provides a place for the exchange of language. Students listen. Students talk. Issues are raised that encourage different perspectives in order to generate not only individual ideas but also tolerance, patience, and articulation.

This has been a brief sample of how I approach literacy in my classroom. Now, I intend to explain how literacy develops from silence through a series of steps that will provide a closer look at modern rhetoric–through attitude, environment, and responsibility. Tradition has taught us that the responsibilities of the teaching profession include "just teaching" and "just writing." However, an evolution of pedagogical ideas over several decades has challenged this traditional, non-reflective approach to teaching writing. While teachers were always responsible for

establishing objectives and goals, their attitudes toward pedagogical methods were never deeply explored or considered a dominant component of their practice. Today, teaching professionals are expected to have an underlying philosophical perspective that justifies their approaches and methods. Furthermore, changes in the educational system were concerned with more concrete forms of innovation. Experimental education like the school without walls was a popular cry in the sixties; however, the academic environment has still maintained its basic classroom structure intact as a place of learning. In addition, responsibility for learning was clearly ascribed to the teacher and curriculum. As educational practices began moving from a teacher-centered to a student-centered learning environment, the responsibility of learning shifted from teacher to student. Along with these changing parameters of professional guidelines, students have become more conscious writers. Ultimately, in this way students can reach autonomy as writers. They learn to trust their own intuitive processes and creative instincts when they depend on their own critical judgments more often than the teacher's.

Let's consider attitudes within the classroom. The makeup of students today consists of multicultural backgrounds, ambiguities of identity, varying values and even conflicting moralities. Somehow, the teacher needs to address this macrocosm of personalities within a writing workshop. Meanings vary from individual to individual and unless classroom discussion operates as an open-ended activity, learning will shut down. The college classroom explores new thinking which means new attitudes and social mores. Teachers need to be aware of their own social and personal attitudes in order to facilitate and become a part of the learning process. Current textbook readers contain essays that reflect the attitudes and cultural

interests of Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and countless others. Nowhere within the university atmosphere is this diversity as apparent as in the composition classroom. Individual beliefs, traditions, and customs pervade the thinking of these students and are reflected in their writing.

As students learn within this environment to deconstruct their cultural, racial, and gender prejudices, they can also learn to socially construct their opinions within a caring atmosphere that encourages differences. New knowledge is tested through the writing process. Just as Nel Noddings asserts in her feminine approach to the evaluation of student writing, Elizabeth Flynn also confirms, "The teacher does not demand that the student come to her, accept her standards and values. Rather she receives the language of the student and attempts to work with it" (*Encountering Student Texts* 54).

Silence moves into verbal discourse and what might have been a very linear approach to reading and writing becomes a shuttling of ideas among the students. Once discussion has been stimulated by an initial topic in my composition classroom, I organize the class into small groups where they can collaborate. Not only does the change of movement bring a relief to the ordered rows and uni-directional focus from student to teacher, but those students who are intimidated by a large group setting find it more comfortable to participate in small groups. Now the focus has shifted to a student-peer relationship. I ask the group to select a recorder so that one student must commit the group's ideas to writing which will be shared with the whole class. If there is an unclear goal for the group discussions, some students tend to lose focus and less interaction occurs.

Listening to their peers and being listened to is a positive reinforcement of their own ideas and opinions. When group work is applied to peer editing, listening becomes key to the development of meaning. Students can learn that others may have similar experiences and difficulties. Students can learn how to accept others' opinions without taking offense since they also learn how to evaluate the validity of those opinions. Finally, through listening students can learn that the final authority for changes in their writing becomes their own decision, and thereby, gain authorship.

After one class discussion on gender differences while considering the roles women and men express in society, I organized the class into small discussion groups. The students continued their discussion as I asked them each to think about why they would or would not follow a non-traditional career for their sex, for example, a woman firefighter. They were to question each other to elicit gender responses. Difficulties arose as they faced each other and themselves. Some groups needed prodding while others appeared quite fluent. To finalize the social exchange I asked the students to describe their ideal man or woman in their notebooks. Some considered the character of the individual more important than physical attributes. Perhaps most significant was that this ideal person knew how to treat another with understanding and respect. Despite the individual differences among the students, all could agree on this main point. At the start students began with establishing their own ideas; they listened to others, expressed their opinions, and finally integrated all they had thought, heard, and learned into prose. In short, they made meaning and learned something.

In the composition environment students' reflections are nurtured through dialogue into writing and from writing into knowledge. As Knoblauch and Brannon describe in their explanation of discourse as knowledge, "Making verbal discourse, then, is a process of asserting connections among the ideas, images, . . . insights, fragmentary lines of reasoning, feelings, intuitions, and scraps of knowledge that comprise a person's experience of some subject" (*Rhetorical Traditions* 68-69). Here students' private thoughts are given presence and authority. What began as a paradox of silence in literacy evolved into an assimilation of ideas transformed from internal and social dialogue into writing.

Finally, considering their new responsibilities, teachers reflect on new objectives in the writing class. Students can learn how to become more writing competent with a secondary focus on mechanical correctness. This isn't to say that student writing should not address correctness; however, a pedantic approach to writing tends to focus on the trivia of rules and ignores a broader understanding of the process. Through a more reflective approach students fulfill more responsible roles for their own learning and discover for themselves how to construct language to mean something. Anthony Petrosky is one English professor who discusses his dialectic approach to the writing process which I feel complements my own style. He states:

> Out of habit and a compulsion to write while I read, I write comments on students' essays and poems. They almost always take on a life of their own. I ask questions, and I speak back, sometimes pushing against a passage, sometimes summarizing what I make of a passage and asking if that is what the writer makes of it, and sometimes

> praising strong readings or arguments or images. At times I ask students to revise papers (or poems) and other times I simply speak back and let the students do what they want. (*Encountering* 202)

Students adjust to new roles as conscious writers as they take responsibility for their own learning. Greater autonomy develops for the student-writer in relationship to the student-reader, and in response to the teacher-writer and teacher-reader. Like our students we construct meaning from our beliefs, others' myths, and hopefully, forge some truths through literacy. If we take as our guide the evolving nature of language and with an honest appraisal mark our pedagogies with signposts for others to read and respond to, we are at least contributing responsibly to our global community of thinkers.

Through the reflective approach to writing the teacher soon learns a new responsibility and that is to provide an atmosphere for students where they can develop their own incentives to write rather than merely subscribe to scholastic demands. Assignments assume a larger purpose than just product-oriented tasks. They enrich the curiosity of students by enlisting their independence. It is the decision-making component of the writing process that fosters self-reliance. All this happens within the artificial environment of the classroom. What is natural to a student is at times unnatural in a composition class. What strikes me as the underlying dynamic of the writing workshop is the tension that arises from the performance of a natural process, reflective thinking, transformed (as preferable to being manipulated) into concrete written expression that is subject to scrutiny and evaluation. The language that may feel the most comfortable to the student may not, and often is not, the language of a composition class. The collaborative setting

in a writing workshop offers a place where these inconsistencies can be worked on and hopefully, worked out. Peer editing is an opportunity for students to share knowledge, negotiate their ideas, and substantiate their own opinions. Yet, an artificial environment is not equivalent to a false environment even though as writing teachers we know the challenges inherent within physically sterile surroundings. The creativity of the writing process, exploring new ideas and vistas, embodies what is natural to the student whereas the operation of writing produces a certain artificiality. These apparent contradictions are more fully resolved as teachers view literacy originating from an internal silence. As teachers of literacy we need to facilitate the expression of language as we recognize and interact within these contradictory yet complementary environments. This is the paradox of silence where inner dialogue and outward expression begin to embrace each other.

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**Title:** Paper presented at the 1997 4C's Convention (Phoenix)
The Literacy of Silence

**Author(s):** Linda L. Reesman

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**Publication Date:**
March 12-15, 1997

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